

# MARTOR



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## **V. Book Reviews**

**Norah Benarrosh-Orsoni. 2019. *La maison double. Lieux, routes et objets d'une migration rom.* Nanterre : Société d'Ethnologie, 250 p.**

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This book is the first anthropological monograph that touches upon a phenomenon that has received growing attention in Europe after the fall of the Iron Curtain and subsequent EU enlargement, namely the East-West circular migration of Roma. Meritoriously, not only does it look at both ends of the migratory route, in this case Romania and France, but it also depicts the journey of both people and objects between the origin and destination countries. Last but not least, the book endeavors to account for people's enterprise of lodging or anchoring themselves in both places ("*double ancrage*," in French) by simultaneously building a house and tending to their home in their native village in Arad region and establishing a home in the Parisian region of Montreuil. And this is, I believe, one of the book's strengths, namely that it challenges the public representation of Roma as eternal nomads, a stereotype derived from the ease and frequency with which Roma move between places, portraying them instead as people attached to places. Moreover, and here I identify another strength of the book, it nuances the anthropological knowledge that has been taken without a grain of salt that the Roma, as opposed to their neighboring populations, do not show an interest in the material world,<sup>1</sup> and furthermore, ideologically speaking, they play down the importance of the house and the household (Stewart 1997). Drawing on the work of Romanian sociologist Stahl (1973), who proposed the household (*gospodărie*, in Romanian) as the central social unit of

the Romanian rural world, Benarrosh-Orsoni advances the concept, central to her work, of the transnational household ("*maisonnée transnationale*," in French) to be comprised of the family members who would have lived under the same roof had it not been for migration and who, despite living dispersed in two countries, continue to organize themselves and cooperate as a family unit (p. 14). The seven chapters of the book are dedicated to answering the question that drives her ethnographical inquiry, namely: "*Comment la migration c'est elle imposée pour eux [les Roms, m. n.] comme le meilleur moyen de devenir un jour des adultes respectables parce qu'accomplis?*" (How can one explain the fact that Roma have embraced migration as the main way of one's becoming a respectable and thus accomplished person?) (p. 13). The book is illustrated with twenty-eight photos of the domestic life of Roma both at home and abroad, taken by the author, plus two maps of the two places between which the Roma on whom the study focuses move. The ethnographic material was gathered over almost a decade: in 2006 the Roma in Montreuil caught the author's attention, and in 2007 she befriended the families she was later to accompany along their journeys back home.

In the Introduction to the book, the author connects the transnational shuttle circulation of Romanian citizens (including the Roma) that started in the early 2000s with the internal migration for agriculture work that prevailed during communism in Romania, which had allegedly kindled

1) One noteworthy exception to this view is the recent publication by Berta (2019).

in people a disposition for movement. Moreover, she foregrounds the theoretical framework of the ethnography, namely the material culture approach to the relation between objects and people. Learning about the author's first encounters with the characters of the book, the reader is warned about the gender bias of the research: as a woman the author spent time with women and hence the domestic space and the family became the main loci of analysis.



The first chapter, *Du squat à la ville. Domestiquer les espaces de vie* (From the squat to the city. Domesticating the spatial realms of life), describes the subjective geography of the migration town, as perceived by the Roma, and how they move from their dwelling places to the spots in the town where they earn their livelihood. It presents the changes that the Roma experienced in their housing conditions in Montreuil in relation with the degree of openness of local politics towards accommodating them. In the early 2000s, the Roma squatted abandoned houses and lived in open spaces in the streets. In 2008 they were allocated caravans and later, flats in the town. The chapter stresses on the one hand, the Roma's propensity for domesticating their different living spaces and on the other hand, the contrast between the state institutions' and NGOs' ways of thinking about housing and the Roma conceptions of dwelling. Out of the anonymous spaces of the caravan, the Roma carve a place and a home of their own to match their conceptions of relatedness. The women scavenge for food and clothes in town, activities that the author praises for their recycling qualities.

The second chapter, *Courir après l'argent* (Chasing money), details the combination of economic activities providing the earnings that are saved to be later invested in the houses at home: from different activities deployed in the street (begging, selling newspapers) to employment and social benefits.

The third chapter, *Prendre la route. Des circulations humaines et matérielles* (On the road. The circulation of people and objects), takes the reader behind the closed doors of the informal organization of return trips between Romania and France. These are carried out in minibuses run by ethnic Romanian families—who serve networks of Roma related people—and are characterized by the lack of planning, flexibility, and unexpectedness. The objects that travel in the trunks of the minibuses—food and medicine from Romania and furniture, cosmetics, and clothing from France—index the affection and the care that infuse the relationships in which the people at both ends of the trip are embedded.

The fourth chapter, *Au téléphone. Technologies familiales et communautaires* (On the phone. Family and community technologies), describes how the Roma, who take great pleasure in telling stories and chatting, make use of the phone in order to feed sociality both across countries and inside the local community. They also rely on other technologies, such as Mp3s or YouTube, to make the religious—since the Roma of this book were converted to neo-Protestantism—seep into their domestic places. Particularly, the phone is used to consult with local religious fortune tellers, *plorocita*.

In the fifth chapter, *Au village. Espace de parenté et de voisinage* (In the village. The realm of relatedness and neighborhood relations), we learn how migration and the money derived from it influenced the local forms of dwelling that saw a transition from the adobe house to the modern house. Here we are led by the hand into the courtyards of Roma who move freely between neighboring households, not bothering about thresholds or boundaries, in a way reminding of Stewart's (1997) Hungarian Rom symbolically breaking down the walls of the house. Central to the social order of Roma is marriage, and here marriage allocates people to houses: the bride goes to live with her husband

and his parents. The cadet stays with his parents, while his elder brothers move out with their wives, once they can afford it, into new houses. The house thus offers the newly formed couples an avenue for independence from the old generation. The chapter pays special attention to the hardships a daughter-in-law (in Romani, *bori*) faces in her marital house, the source of it being her mother-in-law.

The sixth chapter, *Dans la maison. Espace et gestes domestiques* (At home. Domestic spaces and gestures), describes how the Roma make use of the space they dwell, which is mainly characterized by the lack of intimacy. The interior of houses is dominated by what the author calls the aesthetic of opulence reflected in the cabinets and the “good rooms.” This is the realm of women who decorate it and endeavor to keep it clean.

The seventh chapter, *Eriger la maison moderne* (Raising the modern house), chronicles the process of building a house in the home village with the money earned abroad: houses are raised by Romanian workers under the complacent gaze of the Roma.

The Conclusions to the book propose that the appropriation of the space by the Roma both at home and abroad could be read as a double anchoring, hence a double presence. This nonetheless opens questions about, for instance, the double absence of the migratory Roma from both their Romanian homes and their homes abroad.

I strongly believe that the book is a must read not only for scholars of Romani studies or those interested in migration and its material culture, but also for a wider readership from both home and migration countries, Romania and France, for whom Roma remain a mystery. Relatedly, I must admit that I found the reading of the book to be at times hindered by the theoretical accounts given in a pedagogical tone. Moreover, the multitude of characters and names does not help the narrative. These drawbacks might prevent the book from reaching beyond an academic audience. Yet leaving aside these small downsides, I heartedly recommend the ethnography to students in anthropology. And I also hope to see a Romanian translation of the book one day.



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